

Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry - Asbestos

This fact sheet answers the most frequently asked health questions about asbestos. For more information, you may call the ATSDR Information Center at 1-800-447-1544. This fact sheet is one in a series of summaries about hazardous substances and their health effects. This information is important because this substance may harm you. The effects of exposure to any hazardous substance depend on the dose, the duration, how you are exposed, personal traits and habits, and whether other chemicals are present.

SUMMARY: Exposure to asbestos usually occurs by breathing contaminated air in workplaces that make or use asbestos. Asbestos is also found in the air of buildings containing asbestos that are being torn down or renovated. Asbestos exposure can cause cancer and other serious lung problems. This substance has been found in at least 58 of the 1,430 National Priorities List sites identified by the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA).

What is asbestos?

(Pronounced as bes' tus)

Asbestos is the name that's used for a group of six different fibrous minerals (amosite, chrysotile, crocidolite, and the fibrous varieties of tremolite, actinolite, and anthophyllite) that occur naturally in soil and rocks in some areas. Asbestos fibers vary in length and may be straight or curled. Asbestos fibers are resistant to heat and most chemicals. Because of this, asbestos fibers are used for a wide range of manufactured goods, mostly roofing shingles, ceiling and floor tiles, paper products, asbestos cement products, friction products (automobile clutch, brake, and transmission parts), textiles, packaging, gaskets, and coatings.

What happens to asbestos when it enters the environment?

Asbestos can enter the air and water from the weathering of natural deposits and the wearing down of manufactured asbestos products, such as brake pads. Small fibers may remain suspended in the air for a long time before settling. Larger fibers tend to settle more quickly. Asbestos fibers aren't able to move through soil and they aren't broken down to other compounds in the environment. Therefore, they can remain in the environment for decades or longer. Asbestos fibers may build up in animals.

How might I be exposed to asbestos?

Breathing low levels in air. Breathing higher levels in air while working in industries that make or use asbestos products or near a building that contains asbestos products and is being torn down or renovated. Breathing higher levels in air near an asbestos-related industry or near an asbestos-containing waste site. Drinking water containing asbestos from natural sources or from

asbestos-containing cement pipes in drinking water distribution systems.

How can asbestos affect my health?

Asbestos mainly affects the lungs. Changes in the membrane surrounding the lung are quite common in workers exposed to asbestos. These are also sometimes found in people living in areas with high levels of asbestos in the air, but effects on breathing usually aren't serious. Breathing very high levels of asbestos may result in a slow buildup of scar-like tissue in the lungs and in the membrane that surrounds the lungs. This disease is called asbestosis, and is usually found in asbestos workers and not in the general public. People with asbestosis have shortness of breath, often along with a cough and sometimes heart enlargement. This is a serious disease and can eventually lead to disability or death.

How likely is asbestos to cause cancer?

The Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) has determined that asbestos is a known carcinogen. It is known that asbestos causes cancer in people. There are two types of cancer caused by exposure to high levels of asbestos: cancer of the lung tissue itself and mesothelioma, a cancer of the membrane that surrounds the lung and other internal organs. Both of these are usually fatal. These diseases don't develop immediately, but show up only after many years. Interactions between cigarette smoke and asbestos increase your chances of getting lung cancer. Studies of workers suggest that breathing asbestos can increase the chances of getting cancer in other parts of the body (stomach, intestines, esophagus, pancreas, kidneys), but this is not certain. People who are exposed to lower levels of asbestos may also have an increased risk of developing cancer, but the risks are usually small and are difficult to measure. It is not known whether ingesting asbestos causes cancer. Some people who had been exposed to asbestos fibers in their drinking water had higher-than-average death rates from cancer of the esophagus, stomach, and intestines. However, it isn't known whether this was caused by asbestos or by something else.

Is there a medical test to show whether I've been exposed to asbestos?

Chest X-rays cannot detect asbestos fibers, but can detect early signs of lung disease caused by asbestos. Other tests (lung and CAT scans), are also useful in detecting changes in the lungs. Tests exist to measure asbestos fibers in urine, feces, mucus, or material rinsed out of the lung. However, low levels of asbestos fibers are found in these body fluids in nearly all people, so higher-than-average levels can only show that you have been exposed to asbestos, not whether you will experience any health effects.

Has the federal government made recommendations to protect human health?

In 1989, the EPA banned all new uses of asbestos; uses established before this date are still allowed. The EPA has established regulations that require school systems to inspect for damaged asbestos and to eliminate or reduce the exposure by removing the asbestos or by covering it up. The EPA has set a limit of 7 million fibers per liter (MFL) as the concentration of long asbestos fibers that may be present in drinking water.

Glossary

Carcinogen: A substance that can cause cancer.

CAS: Chemical Abstract Service.

MFL: Million fibers per liter.

CAT scan: A medical test in which a computer makes a 3-dimensional image of a body organ.

References

Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry (ATSDR). 1995. Toxicological profile for asbestos. Atlanta, GA: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Public Health Service.

Where can I get more information?

ATSDR can tell you where to find occupational and environmental health clinics. Their specialists can recognize, evaluate, and treat illnesses resulting from exposure to hazardous substances. You can also contact your community or state health or environmental quality department if you have any more questions or concerns.

For more information, contact

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